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AUTHOR Hilliard, Asa G., III
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ABSTRACT

It is generally true that when people are deprived of their own cultural forms and are coerced into adopting the cultural forms of others, disorder, stress, and even disability will occur. Conversely, the basic strength of any people results from their experience of historical and cultural continuity. The strengths of African-American children and families are to be found in their participation as members of a distinct cultural group.
African-American culture, like all others, functions as a basis for the group's mobilization to work in its own behalf and provides for group identity, purpose, and direction. African-American children and families are strong when they feel themselves part of something much larger than themselves. Although such strength is not recognized in the typical speculations and research of academics, nor in the distortions of television sitcoms and media fantasy, overwhelming evidence of strength in African-American children and families exists and can be seen, for example, in strong work orientation, achievement motivation, and kinship ties. Remedies for low performance among African-Americans are the same remedies other groups employ and enjoy; where group identity exists, the strengths of children and families will be manifest. (RH)

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STRENGTHS: AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Asa G. Hilliard III

THE 1982 CATHERINE MOLONY MEMORIAL LECTURE

PS 013233

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Strengths: African-American Children And Families

Asa G. Hilliard III

I am honored to be in this very special place at this very special time. I am especially pleased because I sense the character of the environment that many people are trying to create here. Indeed, this morning I am absent from the beginnings of such an environment in Atlanta--our Saturday School which for a full semester has been located in a housing project in one of the city's low income areas. At our Saturday School a group of professors, graduate students, and parents work together with children, teaching some basic skills, some history and culture. We started out to be helpful, but what has happened to us in the process is that no one wants to miss Saturday School: It has come to mean more to us probably than it does to the children. And so while it's hard for me to miss it this morning, I'm happy to be here because I feel I'm right at home, especially when I hear about how you have to go about paying for things and who has to do the cleaning up and so forth.

I have done a lot of work on testing, but I have no intentions whatsoever of talking to you about testing, mainly because it's irrelevant to what you came to hear: the strengths of people with specific focus on Black children and families.

The strengths of Black children and families have been demonstrated many times over. Students of African-American family life are likely to be quite familiar with the major academic writings on the subject. W.E.B. DuBois (1909) was the first to study the African-American family systematically. Significantly DuBois, in this and later studies of African-American people, utilized a knowledge of the African antecedents in history and culture as a starting point for his analysis. Nearly thirty years later, E. Franklin Frazier (1939), the next most significant scholar in this area, took the position that no meaningful remnants of an African past were to be found among people who were "only American and nothing more." African-Americans, he strongly maintained, were to be distinguished if at all by color and/or caste: colored, Negro, Black, or poor but not African.

Daniel P. Moynihan (1970) disturbed the academic peace with his well-meaning but poorly-grounded article on Black families. According to Moynihan, slavery and oppression had broken the will of the Black family which as a result could now be seen merely as a "tangle of pathology."

The reaction to Moynihan's little piece was fast, furious, and relentless. It continues to this day in many forms. Andrew Billingsley (1968) led the fray and was joined by such notables as Robert Staples (1977), W. Nobles (1974), R. Hill (1971), J. Ladner (1971), and many others. Hill in particular was masterful in milking from vast amounts of data important nuances that escaped less sensitive observers. Where Hill saw strength in Black families, Nobles saw the same strength manifest in the African-American people, a significantly different but quite compatible perspective.

As I look back at the Moynihan controversy, I believe that his "tangle of pathology" hypothesis angered African-American scholars not so much because they weren't aware that African-American families were under siege in multiple ways and that the siege did do harm to the families. I believe the anger, outrage, and surprise were generated because the hypothesis was framed as if it dealt with the whole complex of African-American reality. While recognizing

past oppression, it failed to recognize or to acknowledge present oppression. While it tried to illuminate the condition of the oppressed it avoided analyzing the dynamics of oppression. Finally, the hypothesis revealed the author's true distance from flesh-and-blood African-American people by interpreting statistics on African-American families without understanding the culture.

Were African-American families trapped in a self-perpetuating tangle of pathology? What else could explain the persistence of the condition? For me the salient dimensions which describe and which determine the life experiences of African-American children and families are these:

1. African-American cultural life is the product of a creative amalgamation of antecedent African and American cultural forms.

2. African-Americans, historically and in the present, have had and continue to have extraordinary stresses due to a variety of forms of systematic and pervasive, overt and defacto oppression.

It is impossible to understand the reality of African-American experiences without an awareness of these two dimensions. That is why we can learn more about African-American children and families from sensitive novelists, poets, and playwrights who observe from this perspective than we can from virtually the entire body of research which has been done and which is being done on African-American children and families. The picture that emerges is not a traditional presentation of the African-American family which would be hurt just as much by naive romanticization as by malicious denigration. Neither positive nor negative myths serve to change the real condition of African-American people.

I must pause to clarify my strong preference for the term "African-American." It is the only designation that is culturally and historically accurate. The designations "Negro," "Colored," "Black," "minority," simply do not provide us

with information that helps us to focus on cultural and historical realities. Perhaps these labels are both cause and effect of error. We see this in the apparent preference of American social scientists for analytical models that focus their efforts on individuals, couples, and nuclear families. Since most American behavioral scientists share the same cultural tradition or are trained by those who do, perspectives from that tradition are projected onto any cultural group, probably unconsciously (Hall, 1977). For example, analysts of African-American language, often in complete ignorance of any African antecedents, proceed to treat what they hear and read as if that was all (Turner, 1969)--and this is after years of empirical work that demonstrated gross errors.

*

I would define culture as nothing more than the ways by which people learn to live in and use their environment, ways that are more or less unique to the particular group to which a person belongs. Every group in turn creates language, values, definitions, symbols, rituals, tools, religion, and so forth that are the structures or building blocks of the future.

All people are constantly creating extensions of their culture. Ye disorder, stress, and even disability will occur when cultural forms are arbitrarily delegitimized and suppressed by outside groups, and when coercion is used to cause a group to adopt alien cultural forms, especially when these are propagandized as superior to those of the dominated group. It is natural for individuals and groups to learn to function in a variety of cultural situations; it is the coercion of cultural imperialism that is deadly.

Schools in our nation have developed a hostility to cultural variations, as their mono-cultural curricula reflect. In effect, society has made cultural conformity part of the price for educational access. For example, the child who reads Chaucer and the child who reads Wole Soyinka are both readers. It is the cultural chauvinist who will make Chaucer the better of the two, or even the more necessary of the two.

*

Oppression and domination are present realities, yet few educators acknowledge their existence and still fewer understand how they work. The theorists who do -- Fanon (1967), Memmi (1965), Hodge, Struckman and Trost (1975), Blauner (1976), Jordan (1977), Ngubane (1979), Cabral (1973), Freire (1973) -- tell us that domination is generally effected through the destruction of the history and culture of a people. Educators must therefore look to see what part schools play in that process. For example, to what extent do schools and child development and family service agencies reflect and utilize the true history and culture of their clients? Are they historically and culturally neutral? If not, are the history and culture presented appropriate to the mission of the school or agency?

The destruction of history and culture, just like physical containment and engendered dependency, are important parts of the dynamics of oppression. At this time, the vast majority of African-Americans are dependent in a number of ways.

1. African-Americans are economically dependent on institutions and resources that are controlled almost completely from outside the community.

2. African-Americans are almost totally dependent for media images of themselves on alien image producers. For example, the only effective father of a Black family on prime-time television is the white father on "Different Strokes"; the only effective coach of Black basketball players is the White Shadow. None of the other "sitcoms" dealing with Black life--"The Jeffersons," "Sanford and Son," "That's My Momma"--is controlled by African-Americans. White writers are thought to be more expert than African-Americans on what it means to be Black.

3. African-Americans attend schools which in almost all cases are controlled by someone who is not African-American.

4. African-American children and families are ruled by concepts and definitions

which their representatives had little or no part in creating.

I could go on. But the point should be clear. Systematically, the stresses of coercion, frequently hostile or insensitive, remain a primary part of the lives of African-American children and families.

Under natural circumstances families, as an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of a community, are expected to serve certain basic functions. They nurture, they teach, they protect. Under coercive circumstances, these natural processes become distorted. If the coercion is pervasive and continuing, the distortion of natural processes will be seen not merely in individual nuclear families but in the whole cultural network of which the families are a part. The capacity of families to nurture, teach, and protect is tied directly to the degree of freedom they experience.

This leads me to my major point. It is the African-American family, meaning the cultural group, which must be looked at in terms of its strengths first and foremost. Then and only then can we speak of the strengths, or weaknesses, of individuals, couples, and nuclear families. It would be a cruel hoax for me to suggest to you that each nuclear family must solve its problems alone, in isolation from other African-American families, though this has been happening on an accelerated basis. We know that a few families will "make it," as indeed some have. But that has always been the case. What has not changed for African-American families is that <u>as a group</u> there has been no move off the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder nor do I hear anyone making forecasts as to when such a move might happen. For individual nuclear African-American families who have "made it," frequently the very tactics which led to their "making it" are those that contribute to the disunity and destruction of their group.

Maybe I can make this point even stronger by calling to your attention the fact that the nuclear family does not exist in reality for <u>any</u> cultural group. It is an artifact of academic models. All families are "extended."

How else can we explain the clarity brought on by a crisis such as that which has occurred over the Falkland Islands? Is there anyone who could not predict where our national alliance would be as between England and Argentina? Neutrality?!?! Beyond all the talk of treaties, NATO, and so forth, it got down to kith and kin, or cultural unity, just as it did in relation to Zimbabwe and South Africa earlier.

This is not to say that all extended families are alike culturally. In fact, because of the unsophisticated view we take of "American culture," one which is based on an ideology of assimilation instead of the reality of diversity, the extended character of the family in the cultural majority in America is masked. As African-Americans surrender and become indistinct as a cultural group, they do not become integrated into a mainstream, since the mainstream does not yet exist. They become disintegrated in a sea of cultural diversity, unable to mobilize as a group in any direction since the "we" no longer exists. Under such circumstances it can only be "every family for itself."

The basic strength of any person, couple, or family is found in the experience of historical and cultural continuity. Many people may not be consciously aware of their culture, yet they live in it just the same. Every culture loses members from its core for a variety of reasons. This is natural and is to be expected. The point is not whether a culture remains fixed or whether it changes, not whether some of its members grow away from it or not, not whether it is good to be a part of one culture rather than another. The point lies in the historical fact of the <u>functions</u> of culture, one of which is to serve as a basis for group identity, purpose, and direction. Above all, culture serves as a basis for a group's mobilization to work on its own behalf. W.E.B. DuBois saw this in 1909.

> When in any case these ancestral customs in family, clan, and tribal life could be preserved, revolt against slavery followed. This is the secret of the Haytian Revolution.

Other authors have noted the power of culture as an element in resistance to domination (Cabral,

1973) (Ngubane, 1979) (Fanon, 1967). The greater power of culture, I believe, rests in its function of defining, of giving direction. Individuals, couples, and isolated families do not in and of themselves have either history or culture. Only as a part of a group can they have historical tradition and culture. Confusion about cultural identity limits the power of individuals, couples, and groups.

Strength comes from unity. Unity comes from shared culture and history. When I was in Africa, the most common answer I got to the question, "Who are you?," was the person's giving me the name of his or her tribe. When a person said, "I am Ibo," "I am Yoruba," "I am Fanti," "I am Kru," or "I am Mende," you had the feeling that the person was located comfortably and was clearly a part of something much greater than him or herself. By contrast, when a person identifies him or herself as a "minority," what do we know about him or her other than the fact that he or she has surrendered culturally and now appears to live in isolation? A person is strong when his or her people as a whole are strong. African-American children and families are strong when consciously or unconsciously they feel themselves to be a part of something much larger than themselves. Yet, cultural self-affirmation must not be built on the negation of the traditions of others (Ngubane, 1979)--and therein lies the dilemma.

Those who control the institutions of our society do not conceptualize the matter in the way that I have described it. That is to say, although they are themselves part of a cultural tradition, they are not aware of it as such, nor are they aware of the culture of others. Therefore, problems are defined as problems of individuals and isolated families. For example, it is much easier to get grants and contracts to study pathology in Black children and families than it is to get contracts and grants for the Schomburg Library and Museum. It is much easier to get funds to compare the performance of "racial" groups on some irrelevant test than it is to get funds to produce appropriate media about Black people. It is much easier to get funds to develop exotic new pedagogical strategies than it is to convene working groups to collect, produce, and synthesize materials on Black history and culture. It is

much easier to get money to train paraprofessional workers in a variety of helping professions than it is to get funds for a Black Think Tank like a Hoover Institute, a Rand Corporation, a Brookings Institute, or a Heritage Foundation.

At the root of the whole situation, then, is a conceptual conflict. As Louis King and Hector Meyers (1980) wrote:

> We argue at the end that Black children and youth are not only in deep trouble but that their realities are being systematically misrepresented because of the inadequacy of models to deal with their class condition defined by the coordinates--Black and poor. ...The methods have not changed because the theories of domination have not changed. Genetic determinism and Social Darwinism still prevail and dominate...We shift between positions which keep the social structure intact. Our theories are uninformed by an understanding of history, devoid of a method for analysis and understanding of the relationship between the child and the social process, and therefore, they are without a vehicle for transformation of the condition of our children and youth.

If the academics are guilty of misrepresenting the reality of African-American children and families, the main informant in our national culture, television, is abominable. For example, as mentioned earlier, "Different Strokes" is the only prime time "sitcom" with an effective father for Black children. In this program, a white millionaire widower honors the deathbed request of his Black housekeeper to adopt her two sons. These children are described as "street wise" kids from Harlem. (Why are highly intelligent Black children always called "street wise?" Highly intelligent white children are not called "suburb wise" or "Park Avenue wise.") The white "father," who lives with his real daughter on Park Avenue, takes the two boys from poverty to hot tubs, maids, cooks, and chauffeurs. Some of the deliberate messages from this "sitcom" are:

1. Arnold learns the value of property and the value of a dollar.

2. Willis and Arnold are challenged by their former friends about rejecting their past and, in the eyes of the writers, they go "overboard" to prove their Blackness. This important issue is treated as a comical event.

3. In a "dream" episode, Arnold tries to keep his "father" from going away on a business trip after dreaming that he won't return.

To summarize, in this and other episodes the images and models say to African-American children that:

1. Your own people are impotent.
2. The white male is your savior.
3. His values are your primary aspiration.
4. Being Black culturally is not important and is inferior.
5. Your own mother on her deathbed turned you over to the white male for fathering.
6. You must move away from your people in order to be saved.

The strengths of African-American children and families are not to be found in the typical speculations and research of academics, nor are they to be found in the magic of media fantasy, the projections of alien writers. While the very survival of African-American children and families testifies to the strength of individuals and families, the source of that strength lies in the historical and cultural base which can be called upon for realistic, meaningful, and positive models for future behavior.

I would like to outline some of the lessons I've learned from the African and African-American experience for the education and parenting of African-American children.

1. Parents must study and know themselves (history and culture).
2. Parents must model the behavior that is expected of their children.
3. Parents must expose their children to

the widest possible variety of experience, systematically and critically.

4. Parenting means involving children in the real world of work and play, joy and pain, and above all, truth.
5. Parenting means participation by parents and children in organized groups that serve the interest of the larger group.
6. Parenting means giving children responsibilities and holding them responsible.
7. Parenting means listening well to what children think and feel.
8. Parenting means telling and retelling the story of one's people to the children so that they may experience continuity and know how to be.

Clearly, these things cannot be accomplished in the absence of a strong cultural base. African-American children must be taught about their own history which goes far beyond the long night of slavery to traditions that still influence world culture. It is a distortion to teach African-American children about European heroes and not about their own heroes who sometimes outdid them, as when Napoleon Bonaparte's crack troops of 50,000 men were defeated in Haiti by an army of slaves, led by General Toussaint L'Ouverture. It is a distortion to teach admiration of Greek philosophers and scientists and not that many of them were taught in Africa by Africans (James, 1976). African-American children, if they understood it, would take courage and pride in the dominance of the African tradition in world music today. A Duke Ellington, Stevie Wonder, Ella Fitzgerald, and hundreds more are not mere musicians, but trailblazers creating the future. Scholars, philosophers, scientists, inventors, artists are also trailblazers. The models for African-American children are to be found among their people--in the biographies and speechs of Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Paul Robeson, Sojourner Truth, Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Julius Nyerere, Lorraine Hansberry, Zora Neale Hurston, Marie Evans, and many more. Once again, my point is that the strength of children and families is to be found in their people. Imagine the feeling and power of the African-American child who knows these models of courage, for analyses of problems and strategies for progress and meaning for life.

But what has happened? Our educational system has disconnected African-American children from their historical and cultural stream. Schools, in ignorance or by design, have operated to suppress, ignore, or delegitimize the knowledge and appreciation of most of the people mentioned above. The reasons are clear to me. At no time in the history of contact with African or African-Americans have they been perceived to be weak or unintelligent really. It was not weakness and stupidity that were pitied but strength and intelligence that were at first respected and later feared. Laws to prevent slaves from learning to read, from congregating in groups, from preaching unsupervised, from owning property, from voting, from holding office were not acts of pity but fear. The destruction of the written records of African history, the denial of publication opportunities for African-American writers, the denial of equal resources for schooling, were not acts of pity but fear.

The image of weak and incompetent Black children and families comes from snapshots of isolated victims, not from motion pictures of a whole people. No one should minimize the existence of casualties among African-Americans. Drug addiction, dropouts, and a once-rare phenomenon, suicides, have begun to be found in alarming proportions among African-Americans, especially among African-American women, where it is now the leading cause of death during ages 18-22. These statistics do not signal individual, family, or group weakness so much as extraordinary stress which is pervasive in our communities. This stress reflects the following undeniable realities:

1. racism in criminal justice
2. crushing unemployment
3. racism in psychological assessment
4. unequal educational opportunity
5. poor sanitation
6. overcrowding
7. poor nutrition
8. use as specimens in social and other experimentation

Compare the African-American child to any other child under such conditions and then see what strength means.

The evidence for strength among African-

American children and families is overwhelming. Robert Hill (1971, 1977) has identified strong work orientation, strong achievement motivation, and strong kinship ties. To sensitive and knowlegeable observers there are many other indicators. For example,

1. As long as anyone can recall, African-Americans, like Africans before them, treat names most seriously, frequently creating new names from old fragments. Unconventional names testify to independence and group strength.

2. African-Americans are well known as trendsetters in dress.

3. African-Americans' competence in sports ability, especially anything in one-on-one competition, is almost as legendary as their sports achievement.

4. African-Americans are still unwilling to copy others in new dance styles, being supremely confident of their own skill and creativity.

5. African-Americans generally are extremely secure in the use of verbal skills from speaking to rapping.

6. African-Americans are quick to identify with African-American heroes. (When Jackie Robinson broke into major league baseball, half the Black teenagers in America began to walk "pigeon-toed" in imitation of him.)

These are merely some of the surface manifestations of a deep cultural substratum.

The remedies for low performance among African-American children and families are really not special at all. They are the same remedies other groups already employ and enjoy. A news article in the March 23, 1981 Atlanta Constitution (Citywise, 1981) describes how affluent parents educate their children, and such parents do the same all over the nation.

> This is the week that the schools send out letters of acceptance and rejection.

> To many of these parents, their child's admission to the right Kindergarten is tantamount to their acceptance, similarly, into the colleges of the Ivy League.
>
> ...The pressure to get a child into the schools often begins shortly after his or her first birthday, since preschools at both Galloway and Trinity take two-year olds. If a child is not enrolled in the program at that age, there is comparatively little chance for the child to be accepted later because of the limited space available. The real entry point is the two-year-old program.

This support is both financial and cultural. Furthermore, it has longterm political consequences, since we are talking about the ultimate leadership of the nation. The education of these children is not left to chance. They do not emerge from a free and open competition with all children. The content they study is not at all limited to technology; it is heavily cultural in the serious sense of the word. Myths of greatness in history plus the right contemporary economic circumstances guide their development.

African-American children need no less. Through group unity the basic steps can be taken. A strong cultural identity is a prerequisite to unity. At the point where group identity exists, the strengths of children and families will be manifest. Ngubane's (1979) notion of simultaneous legitimacy of diverse groups can guide us to the cultural democracy that is every bit as important as the political democracy we claim to have.

ASA G. HILLIARD is Professor of Urban Education at Georgia State University, Atlanta. He holds joint appointments in the Departments of Educational Foundations, Counseling/Psychological Services, and Early Childhood Education. Professor Hilliard served previously as Dean of the School of Education at San Francisco State University. He received his doctorate from the University of Denver and has been a teacher, researcher and lecturer throughout the U.S. and abroad, including six years in Liberia, West Africa. The author of articles and monographs on testing and evaluation, cultural pluralism in education, African and African-American history and culture, and child development, Professor Hilliard has served as an advisor and consultant to the Association for Children, Youth, and Families, the U.S. Department of Education, National Institute of Education, and National Research Council of the National Academy of Science.

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